

10 Tips for Meatless Meals

Whether you're a vegan or 'flexitarian,' vegging out has health benefits

Gone are the days when people tended to think of vegetarians as a small group of earth-loving hippies who spent top dollar for bruised-looking produce at health stores. Vegetarians of every type, from the "flexitarian" (occasional meat eater) to the strict vegan, have gone mainstream.

These days, more and more people are seeking the health benefits of a diet rich in plant-based foods; foods that are now easily found on the shelves of neighborhood grocery stores.

According to the American Dietetic Association, approximately 2.5% of the U.S. adult population eats a diet free of meat, poultry, and fish. And a growing number of people are embracing the flexitarian way of life, which offers many of the health benefits of a vegetarian diet while still allowing occasional meat, fish, and/or poultry.

Of course, some people follow a vegetarian diet for religious or ethical reasons. But enjoying an eating plan rich in plant foods also has many health benefits, ranging from aiding weight loss to preventing disease, experts say.

The American Cancer Society, American Institute for Cancer Research, and American Heart Association all recommend a diet rich in plant-based foods. Such a diet contains an abundance of antioxidants, phytochemicals, and fiber, with low levels of saturated fat and cholesterol.

Indeed, the 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines and updated food pyramid (myPyramid.gov) promote a diet rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, and low-fat dairy -- foods that are the foundation of most vegetarian diets.

Veggie Lingo

"Vegetarian" can mean lots of different things. The various types of vegetarian diets include:

- **Vegan.** Strictest of all, eats only plant products.
- **Lacto-vegetarian.** Eats dairy products along with a plant-based diet.
- **Ovo-vegetarian.** Eats eggs along with a plant-based diet.
- **Lacto-ovo vegetarian (the most common type).** Eats both dairy products and eggs.
- **Pesco-vegetarian.** Eats fish along with a plant-based diet.
- **Flexitarian.** While there's no formal definition, this generally refers to a lacto-ovo vegetarian who occasionally eats meat, fish, or poultry. Sometimes called semi-vegetarian.

The Nutrition Low-Down

Vegetarian diets were once thought to be lacking in certain nutrients. But experts say that with a little planning, vegetarians can easily meet all their nutritional needs.

"You can get all the nutrients you need from a well-planned vegetarian diet, along with all the health benefits of a diet that contains lots of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and protein, yet tends to be low in fat and calories -- a perfect combination for losing weight and promoting good health," says Cynthia Sass, MPH, MA, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

To ensure adequate nutrition, Sass recommends that vegetarians eat a wide variety of foods, including unprocessed whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, beans, and soy products. She recommends using myfoodpyramid.com to help plan meals.

Vegans may find it a little trickier to get enough vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, protein, zinc, vitamin D, and calcium. But a registered dietitian can help devise an adequate vegan meal plan, Sass says.

Healthy Benefits

Vegetarians have lower rates of almost all chronic diseases, including obesity, says Sass. They are less likely to have high blood pressure or high cholesterol, and their eating style helps thwart the development of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some types of cancer.

Recent studies have shown that in general, vegetarians have lower body mass indexes (BMIs), lower percentages of body fat, and lower waist-to-hip ratios than nonvegetarians, Sass says.

"Vegetarian foods tend to be more filling due to the fiber and protein and therefore it makes it easier to eat less and lose weight," Sass says.

But not all vegetarian diets will result in weight loss. While many vegetarians prefer nutritious foods, vegetarian diets can still be high in fat and calories.

"If you fill your plate with high-fat selections like French fries and eat too many calories, your vegetarian eating plan can cause weight gain," says Connie Diekman, RD, MEd, president elect of the ADA.

Instead, she advises eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, nuts, and low-fat dairy.

10 Tips for Eating Meatless

It's easy to be a vegetarian these days, with so many meatless food products on the market, along with all kinds of vegetarian cookbooks and magazines.

If you want to become a 'sometime' vegetarian or just enjoy a meatless meal once in a while, there are ways to do it without learning a whole new way of cooking and eating. First, start by substituting beans for meat or poultry in your favorite dishes, advises Diekman.

"The easiest way to transition into a more plant-based diet is to use familiar recipes substituting vegetarian ingredients," she says.

She recommends making these substitutions in dishes that have strong flavors, such as those with a sweet and sour or marinara sauce. Once you get used to more beans in your diet, experiment with meat substitutes, which look and taste like meat but are made of plant products.

Your second step: The next time you're at the grocery store, pick up one of the many pre-prepared vegetarian convenience foods. Sample several options to find the ones you enjoy.

Here are eight other tips for working more vegetarian meals into your eating plan while meeting all your nutritional needs:

- Look for foods that are fortified with extra nutrients for a nutritional boost. Choose soy products that are fortified with calcium, vitamin D and B12.
- Try tofu and soy crumbles, which are mild-tasting and absorb the seasonings and flavor of whatever you cook them with.
- Eat plenty of dark, leafy greens, which are rich in iron and provide calcium.
- Top salads, soups, stews, and omelets with beans, nuts, or seeds to add protein.
- Add a once-daily multivitamin/mineral for nutritional insurance. See your doctor or registered dietitian if you are pregnant or have any other condition that could require extra supplementation.
- Choose low- and nonfat dairy products.
- Boost the healthy omega-3 fatty acids in your diet by eating fatty fish (if you include fish in your diet), enriched eggs, walnuts, flaxseed, and canola oil.
- Try going meatless one day a week at first. You don't have to cook elaborate vegetarian meals; it can be as simple as having a veggie burger and salad for dinner.

Vegetarianism is a healthy lifestyle, but experts point out that lean meat, fish, and poultry also have nutritional benefits -- as long as you keep your portions moderate. To gain the health benefits of a vegetarian diet and still enjoy animal products, think of the meat, fish, or poultry as a side dish and fill the rest of your plate with plant foods. And be sure to choose the leanest cuts when you do buy meat.

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